

The Recalcitrant Discipline

Mattias Frey University of Kent

Abstract

This article addresses the current state of film studies as a discipline, profession and institution, arguing that the hunt for cultural authority has been the defining feature, motivating force and tragic flaw of film studies. The current self-reflexive soul-searching reveals that the field – no longer a radical upstart – still lacks the gravitas of more established subjects. Departments have responded to identity crises and changing enrolment patterns by mummifying, killing off or burying foundational emphases. The nostalgia for film studies' origins and the jeremiads about an unmanageable, unruly and recalcitrant discipline yield rose-tinted fantasies about community and mutual intelligibility that must be ultimately resisted.

Above all, the relentless hunt for cultural authority has been the defining feature, motivating force and tragic flaw of film studies as a discipline, institution and scholarly activity.

It is important to note that a century ago English literature was still considered a dumbed-down, effeminate intrusion into the cosy upper echelons of society and its education. Real men, in those days, read Greek, Latin or theology.¹ Nevertheless, we have all had our moments. The scenes are familiar – colleagues who cede lecture halls or seminar rooms with the (perhaps jealous) wishes to 'enjoy the popcorn'. I remember clearly a meeting of fellowship winners of a major German research council. The vice-president of the organisation mingled from table to table and asked the participants to introduce themselves and their field. After I announced my project the man, a distinguished chemist, asked (presumably seriously): 'Filmwissenschaft? Ist Filmwissenschaft überhaupt eine Wissenschaft?' (Film studies? Is that a scholarly undertaking?). But such fleeting humiliations must be put into the relief of the many situations where being a film scholar has helped us impress an object of desire or respect, much more so than law, medicine or anything remotely practical or devoid of pleasure.

Contextualised as such, it seems difficult to subscribe to the notion that we enjoy 'no respect'.²

Even if it is a time of soul-searching in the field, this is hardly cause for self-pity. We are a fortunate bunch, especially those of us (all of us?) who have made our hobby into a profession, for which we are (seen globally at least) paid handsomely. I recall fondly Will Straw's *Screen* conference keynote from 2008: after announcing that he aimed to examine (memory forces me to simplify here) the credit sequences of films such as *Michael Clayton* (2007), Straw declared self-deprecatingly but honestly that his undertaking was hardly a 'cure for cancer'. What we do will never have the distinction or 'impact' of such enterprise and will certainly never attract its level of funding and prominence. But put another way: the scholarly investigation of moving images is *not* the cure for cancer and this fact has advantages for its practitioners.

Afflicted by a stubborn middle-child syndrome, film studies has arrived at a point where it is no longer a radical upstart and yet still lacks the gravitas of history, literature, art, let alone the 'hard', and most social, sciences. To be sure, in comparison to media studies – the perennial shorthand for fly-by-night intellectual promiscuity in UK popular discourse – film studies remains positively highbrow. Even those of us who research popular cinema would do well assessed against the characters in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* who study cereal boxes and car crashes.³

The cultural authority that now attends film and, by extension, film studies is the result of a long-wrought battle not without its costs. Repeated movements have sought to make the discipline more rigorous and precise: structuralism, neo-formalism, cognitivism, empirical audience study, the new film history. (Such efforts pre-date the convention of film studies departments: e.g., Hugo Münsterberg's applications of Gestalt psychology.) For however one appraises their results, such attempts have all been advanced with good intentions. They have, however, eroded film studies' radical cachet and élan – without fully compensating the discipline with status among peers.

The outputs of today's younger disciplines, video game studies and 'media theory', have the heady feel of the early *Screen* days, when everything mattered and nothing could be formulated polemically enough. It is hard to imagine future professors of video game studies who moan about how (insert future technology here) has usurped their cutting-edge status and made them feel like dinosaurs. No doubt, however, this is what Rudolf Arnheim felt when he wrote in 1929 that:

Seventy years from now there will be a film museum, and film people will sometimes go there and in a cool projection room, where the best vintages are stored, be shown an old master. Declared genuine through the expertise of Privy Councillor Coogan, its value will be estimated at a hundred thousand marks on the art market. They will wriggle in their seats for an hour and then reel into the street like drunken ducks, their eyes rolling, and they will whisper into each other's bulging ears with flawlessly synchronized, husky voices: 'A work of art, a true Chaplin!'⁴

If this is true the future of film studies as a profession, discipline and institution is assured. Indeed, perhaps one day (if it is not already true) film studies will be seen as a boutique pursuit for the privileged few. Future kings will undertake the investigation of Rossellini and Kurosawa and Scorsese and Fincher – like Prince William did with the history of art at St Andrew's – in order to understand the family collection of digital motion pictures and meet a suitable partner also versed in arcane areas such as analogue projection and British masters such as Powell and Pressburger.

This is not simply a matter of acknowledging Arnheim's fanciful prophecies about film's cultural standing to have been fulfilled. We have reached a stage where we chronicle, periodise, categorise and otherwise reflect on the field and the discipline. The recent, valuable publications of Dana Polan, Lee Grieveson, Haidee Wasson, Rod Stoneman, Duncan Petrie and others – and, in fact, this very dossier – point towards a mature reckoning with the field that transcends anecdote and nostalgia.⁵ With a refreshing sobriety this scholarship has demonstrated how film study and appreciation at universities, museums and other establishments professionalised cinephilia and organised film culture according to individual actions and institutional developments.

But it is also important to note that these works document, but also perform, the invention of film studies. They, by and large, see film studies as the destination and their histories naturally select those moments that anticipate it, rather than the false starts or movements that could have headed in other directions or did arrive at other places. These efforts – as does, it must be stated, the title of this journal – implicitly or explicitly assert film studies as an autonomous discourse and discipline worthy of study and needing to be separated from, or not deemed a mere subset of, art history, aesthetics, media studies, cultural studies, visual studies, moving image studies, sound studies, leisure economics, entertainment business or one of any multitude of possible fields or divisions of which film studies surely shares affinities. In this way, they work to foreground and elevate the status of the profession within the academy and, by extension, in society at large.

Mummification, Death and Burial

Self-reflection can be seen as a symptom of two conditions. The first – and this is the way that the phenomenon has been perceived most often in the field – is a strength. Having completed a march through the institutions for scholarly respectability, we are now taking stock and reflecting on a success story. But another interpretation would be less sanguine about the fortitude of our activities. After all, historians tend to chronicle that which has already become outmoded, those phenomena where chapters have irrevocably closed.

The portents are not especially promising. As a way to buttress their own haemorrhaging enrolments and to groom possible majors, area studies departments have often offered film electives or used motion pictures prominently in their

language offerings and advertising. But in a time of uncertain student recruitment and wobbly tertiary education financing, preventative branding measures within film studies departments have been coalescing. There seem to be three morbid strategies to address this dilemma. The first, what one might call 'mummification', is practised largely by traditional universities of elite reputation as well as the North American and European institutions where moving image study was born. In those auspicious lecture theatres and seminar rooms, film knowledge is imparted as a smorgasbord of national cinemas, canons of great works and authors, key traditions and movements (European and Asian new waves, the avant-garde) and art for art's sake. Many of these courses are called film studies or film and television, but they might as well be called cinema art – or *Film Art*, to allude to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's magisterial survey that underpins the emphases of many if not all of these programmes.⁶ The second strategy is a kind of suicide. In these institutions, founded with the best aspirations but now suffering from downward mobility and a shrinking student market, there is a drive towards the vocational, the practical or the instrumental. Film studies exists as a lifeless context for functional explorations with cameras and post-production equipment and as a stepping stone for the ultimate destinations of 'the media' and as fodder for small talk to grease the goals and desires that must be continually serviced there. Beyond the mummification or death of the discipline, a third strategy seeks its figurative burial. At these universities, film is taught embedded within larger, often nebulous, constellations of communications, design, multimedia studies or digital culture. Purists who earned their PhDs at the aforementioned aesthetically minded schools might complain that in such mergers and acquisitions the original purposes and beauties of film are abandoned and forever lost.

But perhaps such grievances are not entirely warranted. The 1960s and 1970s have come to be remembered with ever-increasing nostalgia as the birth hour of film studies, the heroic age of cinema-going, the golden era of cinephilia and the time when 'movies mattered'.⁷ The turn of the millennium was – despite the contemporaneous 'death of cinema' rhetoric – perhaps even a richer time. Independent video stores were to be found in every major city and university town; Criterion and other labels made all the classics available on crisp DVD editions. Key repertory cinemas still existed and Netflix and LoveFilm transformed the way films could be consumed: three, five, or – in those heady days – eight at a time. YouTube and peer-to-peer networks meant that even the most obscure pictures were available at home at any hour. David Rodowick describes the feeling of finding Pasolini's complete oeuvre in his local video store in 1989: 'earlier I might have prioritized my life around a trip to New York to fill in the one or two Pasolini films I hadn't seen or to review *en bloc* a group of his films. For when would I have the chance again? That evening, I'm sure I passed on Pasolini and moved onto other things, for opportunity and time were no longer precious commodities. There was time.'⁸ I can understand this situation and we all have our own anecdote: I once took a four-and-a-half-hour train journey from

Berlin to Cologne (and a hellish eight-hour night train back) to see Klaus Lemke's *Brandstifter* (1969). It would be harder to justify such flights of fancy these days. Why wouldn't you simply download the video on iTunes or, at the very least, watch it on YouTube?

These rhetorical and philosophical questions have real consequences about what, how, whom and perhaps even why and if we teach. When I arrived at the University of Kent in 2008, the department screened the majority of course films on 35mm in a space designed for such projections. This was not only an attraction for potential students. It also provided a pedagogical justification for making screenings a mandatory component of the module. How much harder it is to argue this case when we are beaming consumer-grade DVDs or Blu-ray discs. Beyond the obvious complaints about the degraded qualities of the image (and sound), these changes have a real effect in an era of carefully calibrated contact hours and heightened student expectations after the increase of fees in England.

In this vein, Eric Smoodin has recently contemplated why film studies became established primarily as a humanities subject in literature and art departments rather than as a social science that deploys the focus and methods of history, economics, sociology or law. One part of his argument illuminates how institutional designs (including timetabling and architecture) have reinforced disciplinary procedures and even the very ontology of our subject. According to Smoodin:

Attempts to shift methodologies and practices for any scholar interested in doing so run into the problem of the formation of film studies within the academy. University film studies classes, in history, literature, or other fields, tend to be taught in theater-type spaces and are given time slots – three to four hours – that are appropriate for showing movies. My own experiences at three institutions seem representative; four-hour classes meeting twice a week, seventy-five-minute classes that meet two times a week with an evening screening time, and two-to-three-hour classes that meet once or twice a week. Thus film studies classes in which films are not shown or that form a secondary part of curriculum seem unthinkable, primarily because of the architecture of the classroom and the time devoted to each class. Similarly, most of the standard textbooks teach students how to read films, to understand genres, to appreciate issues of authorship, and to consider film movements. Film history thus largely becomes the history of styles, aesthetic practices, and narrative structures.⁹

It is not difficult to understand how these bureaucratic 'efficiencies' stifle pedagogical creativity and incentivise the inert repetition of certain questions and answers. In my role of head of subject I had to tell a junior colleague that an exciting new module she wanted to introduce (in which students would experiment with a variety of mobile and alternative modes of viewing) would need to be redesigned so it would not run foul of university-mandated contact-hour regulations. A similar point could be made regarding our research procedures. If we are institutionally incentivised to design our modules and courses around film screenings and scrutinising clips, is it any wonder that our articles and monographs revolve

around such hard-won textual analyses, rather than trips to far-flung archives or interviewees unable to be subsidised by meagre, dwindling research budgets?

The implication of Smoodin's work is to show how the discipline has had many potential pathways over its history. For a long time film study took the form of aesthetic analysis and narrative interpretation and its place primarily in the humanities among literature, language, theatre or art departments. Nevertheless, this was not always the case, as the first efforts to teach film demonstrate. One of the effects of Polan's recent work is to debunk the myth of film studies as the perpetual new kid on the block. *Scenes of Instruction* probes the origins of non-vocational film education in the United States since the 1910s and surveys the often foreshortened early attempts to establish the field in the realms of business and other terrains. According to Polan, 'it is customary to imagine a history of film studies as gaining momentum only as late as the end of the 1950s, then crystallizing in the foundation of the field's professional society (then called the Society of Cinematologists) in 1959, and flourishing in the media-explosive and express-yourself-through-new-arts context of the 1960s'.¹⁰

Polan provides several explanations for this truncated story of the discipline's origins. These include film scholars' construction of a narrative by which they function as heroes who distinguished themselves from 1950s 'mass-culture' intellectuals, who 'tended to see the mass arts as a homogenous bloc of superficiality, formulaic triteness, soulless pandering, degradation of higher reason, and so on'.¹¹ Auteurism functioned handily as a heroic principle of selection and organisation, a procedure intelligible to established fields such as literature and art history (read: cultural authority) and as an allegory for the academics' own self-image. Polan interprets the retrospective scholarly veneration of the psychologist and amateur movie buff Hugo Münsterberg and the ignorance of the film-education pioneer (but business tycoon) Joseph Kennedy as symptomatic of academics' preference to see themselves as descendants of David, rather than Goliath.

Polan's research not only confirms what Smoodin and others have posited regarding the potential itineraries of the field; it, furthermore, provides the key to understanding some of the larger discourses at work in the current nostalgia and self-reflection. Polan provides a pre-history to the reckonings that mark the beginnings of film study with the establishment of 'film studies' departments – and the prime movers of the University of East Anglia, the University of Kent and the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, and New York University, the University of Iowa, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Southern California and others in the United States. With this he implies that film studies pre-existed *Screen*, subjectivity theory and other developments associated with the beginnings of an autonomous, coherent discipline. These insights do not merely constitute a new periodisation. They suggest that the current rosy memories of this specific period could tell us more about what is at stake.

The nostalgia for the 1970s is not only endemic among those scholars who address its key issues (e.g., spectatorship, representation), neither is it limited to those whose work directly builds on or appropriates that body of knowledge

and its key reference points (e.g., psychoanalysis, Marxism). Nor is it adequately explained by the fact that the baby-boom generation of 1968 has had – across Europe, North America and beyond – a structuring effect in establishing its concerns as primary in film studies and almost all other areas of education, culture, society, economics and politics. There is, I submit, nostalgia for a particular kind of discourse and feeling of community. To explain what I mean, let me make an analogy. In *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority* I examine, among other iterations of ‘crisis’ in the profession of film criticism, the warm feelings that attend the memory of Pauline Kael.¹² According to a whole host of commentators, from scholars like Rónán McDonald and Raymond Haberski, to former ‘Paulettes’ David Denby and James Wolcott, Kael was a rare ‘public critic’ who led public discussion and was able to ‘make or break’ the box office of films, the careers of filmmakers, and even the fortunes of entire studios.¹³ These writers mourn Kael’s power and advocate a renewed authority to critics undermined by the spectre of Twitter and Rotten Tomatoes. My book shows that these extraordinary claims for Kael’s (or any other critic’s) influence are easily refuted. The question of *why* we would even want such critics, and what was indeed so special about the era of Kael, Andrew Sarris, John Simon – the ‘golden’ (Haberski) or ‘heroic’ (Lopate) age of criticism – is more revealing. Ultimately, the wistful reminisces seek to reclaim a perceived manageability, insularity and common vocabulary. According to these authors, in those days the battles were bloody but passionate and the fronts were refreshingly clear. My book traces the fears of an ‘atomisation’ or ‘fragmentation’ of culture and its critics and the fear of diminishing authority back throughout the history of film criticism and indeed back to the Victorian era. In those days cultural critics feared that increasingly specialised university departments and subject journals and the rise of the popular press would make the propagation of the ‘best which has been thought and said in the world’ impossible to know, survey and thus disseminate.¹⁴

These fears resound with today’s jeremiads about our unruly and recalcitrant discipline. To my mind a similar phenomenon is at work in the rose-tinted fantasies about film studies’ days of manageability, of community and of mutual intelligibility. There were passionate disagreements in those days, but at least the players were reading the same journals and thinkers, attending the same cinemas and watching the same films. To a certain extent, I can sympathise with some of these perennially academic desires. They explain why a small symposium about a niche subject attended by a handful of engaged experts is almost always more productive and exhilarating than those cattle-call annual meetings of a thousand named-tagged delegates shuffling in and out of a thousand poorly attended presentations in a hotel that might as well be in Manila, Minneapolis or Milton Keynes, so little does one experience illumination of any sort. There are advantages to being able to build directly on previous knowledge when such steps are easily accessible; conversation, collaboration and exchange are as essential in our field as in any other. Nevertheless, the disadvantages of the recycled circulation of information within the sclerotic veins and arteries of a closed system are signifi-

cant and should not be underestimated. The ‘community feeling’ that was (at least imagined) a feature of film studies’ past cannot compensate for the dangers of dim horizons and myopic visions. Great advances have been made in the last ten years regarding search engines, digital and open-access publishing and social media to find, sift through and disseminate theories and data. To be sure, further work here is necessary and urgent, but such developments are possible and in progress.

Perhaps answering this question about the state and self-perceptions of film studies obscures a larger, more important one: What is actually achieved by institutional self-reflection in general and film studies’ (with and without italics) soul-searching in particular? Certainly, a univocal and tamed discipline – the seeming goal of many interlocutors who seem bewildered at the apparently unmanageable purview of the subject – would represent scholarly failure: stagnation, consensus, self-referentiality and a lack of critical mass. Is there any discipline that has remained stable, unmovable or otherwise ‘coherent’ and still fulfilled its goal to advance knowledge?

My own prediction, perhaps to be unearthed in some footnote on the state of the field in one hundred years’ time: film study, whatever it will be called at that time (a subset of computer science?), will never have the status ascribed to history or literature (in this brave new world: blogging studies). That is not to say that cultural esteem is trivial or unimportant. But it is as ephemeral as any moving image: something to be inspected critically or with amusement, but never able to be mastered.

Notes

- 1 See Rónán McDonald, *The Death of the Critic*, London: Continuum, 2007, pp. 88–9.
- 2 On this question, see Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 1989.
- 3 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, London: Picador, 1985.
- 4 Rudolf Arnheim, ‘Old Chaplin Films (1929)’, in *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. Brenda Benthien, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, pp. 145–7; here p. 147.
- 5 See Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (eds), *Inventing Film Studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008; Duncan Petrie and Rod Stoneman, *Educating Film-Makers: Past, Present and Future*, Bristol: Intellect, 2014.
- 6 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th rev. edn, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.
- 7 See Phillip Lopate, *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically: Essays and Criticism From a Lifelong Love Affair with the Movies*, New York: Anchor, 1998; Raymond J. Haberski, *It’s Only a Movie! Films and Critics in American Culture*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001; Dave Kehr, *When Movies Mattered: Reviews From a Transformative Decade*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- 8 D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 26.

- 9 Eric Smoodin, 'Introduction: The History of Film History', in Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (eds), *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 1–33; here p. 17.
- 10 Polan, *Scenes of Instruction*, pp. 3–4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 12 Mattias Frey, *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism: The Anxiety of Authority*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
- 13 See, for example, Haberski, *It's Only a Movie!*; McDonald, *The Death of the Critic*; David Denby, 'My Life as a Paulette', *The New Yorker*, 20 October 2003, p. 170; James Wolcott, 'Waiting for Godard', *Vanity Fair*, April 1997, pp. 46–53; James Wolcott, *Lucking Out: My Life Getting Down and Semi-Dirty in Seventies New York*, New York: Doubleday, 2011.
- 14 The quotation derives from Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 190. On the question of the Victorians' anxieties about the atomisation of intellectual culture, see Daniel G. Williams, *Ethnicity and Cultural Authority: From Arnold to Du Bois*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, p. 24.